

Young Soka Gakkai Members as Political Actors

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Something fundamentally changes in our starting point when we replace the definition 'new religion' with the concept of 'civil society'. Though the concept may be in danger of appearing somewhat passé, as so much discussion focused on civil society during the 1990s, I nevertheless find it useful as a way of opening up a new discussion, not only about Soka Gakkai members' support for the political party Komeito in Japan, but more specifically about the relationship between ethics and politics.

In my recently completed PhD thesis, I look at the political society of young Soka Gakkai Buddhists, and what their political voice brings to the public sphere in Japan. I thereby focus on what is usually regarded as a controversial relationship between a so-called new religious organisation and its support for a political party (Komeito). During my fieldwork among young Soka Gakkai members in Japan in 2003 and 2004, the common taxonomy 'new religion', while arguably appropriate within its own Japanese understanding of the term, began to wear a bit thin. As I began engaging with young Soka Gakkai members who were active Komeito supporters, I found a strikingly active sense of citizenship and commitment to trying to achieve political objectives flowing from wider social interests. Theirs was a life based on learning from associational life, from a commitment to objectives of a common good, and participation in the public sphere – the three spheres that are arguably essential to a thriving civil society. In this article, I compare some common arguments about this political engagement with how Soka Gakkai members' religious outlook seems to affect their political participation at the grassroots level.

It is no secret that religion as a social structure is under attack by so-called secularists such as Richard Dawkins, who, inspired by Fraser's *The Golden Bough*, sees religion as a false science comparable to superstition and magic, a social phenomenon that can be more simply understood through such biological analogies as an infectious virus. One finds similar analogies about new religious organisations in Japan (Nakamaki 2003) where comparisons are made between the spread of a disease and the growth of new religious organisations, with increasing number of people catching the 'disease'. Others such as José Casanova and his book *Public Religions in the Modern World* or David Herbert's *Religion and Civil Society* complicate such views concerning this question of religion and its relationship with modernity.

Perhaps the tension created about a religion's legitimacy in modern societies is nowhere more apparent than in its relationship with politics. In the case of Japan and my case under study, this relationship carries notions of danger, irrationality,

and non-thinking loyalty, as was demonstrated at a press conference I attended prior to the November 2003 Lower House election. At no less public a place than the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan, the well-known political commentator Takao Toshikawa spent well over two-thirds of his talk outlining how politics in Japan would increasingly be dependent on the influence of Komeito and its 'foot-soldiers' from Soka Gakkai, which was the way he defined the people I had just begun to study.

A strong sense of Soka Gakkai's political 'illegitimacy' hung over Toshikawa's arguments. Political 'illegitimacy' may of course come about in many ways, and may not simply be linked to religious status. It could also be because a religion is considered the 'wrong one'. A current example of this is the slurring of Barack Obama as a potential 'undercover' Muslim who has to prove his credentials as a mainstream Christian to have a chance to become the Democratic presidential nominee.

We may find similar assumptions about both political as well as religious illegitimacy following the label 'new religion' in Japan, as indicated by the disease analogy. In the case of Japan, a religious group classified under the banner 'new religion' has seldom been seen in light of the active civil society player it often is. While the good public works of new religious organisations in Japan have been largely ignored by the media and academia alike, there is also typically very little discussion in the media about the various philosophies and practices that are part of the everyday life of many adherents. This is striking not the least in the case of Soka Gakkai, which is the biggest new religious organisation and the most overtly involved with organised politics. For instance, one seldom, if ever, comes across any informative discussion about the meaning of 'human revolution', a philosophical mind-set that is central to understanding the practice of Buddhism for Soka Gakkai members.

The relationship between a religious organisation and a political party tends to conjure up notions of controversy and a sense of political illegitimacy even if its success and 'routinization' in the Weberian sense have lessened any initial public perception of religious 'illegitimacy' that was partly, at least in the case of Soka Gakkai, connected to its early years of aggressive proselytization. While certain weekly tabloid magazines in Japan seem obsessed with the vilification of Soka Gakkai, the more reputable media has tended to treat the activities of religious organisations in general with a silence that is somewhat curious considering the number of people who belong to such organisations. While in recent years some change to this media self-censorship can be seen, with for example Soka Gakkai being referred to more vaguely as simply a peace organisation, this is usually in order to question (and arguably understandably so considering its religious objectives of peace) how far it can continue its support for certain decisions made by

Komeito as a party in government (this is something I discuss in my thesis). Moreover, the Japan Times has also carried a year-long series of bi-weekly articles by Daisaku Ikeda, the long-term spiritual leader of Soka Gakkai.

Yet, even if many of these so-called new religions are seen as more respectable today and certainly are more 'established', the fact that a commentator like Toshikawa can represent a political force as an unquestionable threat to the political establishment and democracy as a whole, without specific details as to exactly why that should be so, says something about the perception of religious organisations' political legitimacy. Seeing Soka Gakkai as a political threat is understandable given its support for Komeito, which means it has real political power as a religious group that no other political force can ignore. Still, a tension became apparent at this early stage in my fieldwork: how did I reconcile what was being represented as a political threat with my own observations that these people seemed to be active citizens with social democratic objectives, contributing to the political process at the grassroots level? I had to look at the fact that the people I was meeting seemed different from the 'foot-soldier' image of mindless masses who would do anything their leaders told them, as portrayed by Toshikawa, despite the reality that they direct their political and social activities into one party endorsed by their religious group and leader.

Next, I would like to look at a few quotes from some of these 'foot-soldiers'. The discipline of anthropology and ethnographic fieldwork is stringent in the sense that it requires long-term participant observation and involvement as a way of gaining a deeper understanding of what motivates people who make up a religious movement, for instance. Such an emic approach and the use of a qualitative methodology, while it does not necessarily dismiss or disagree with broader sociological analyses, may nevertheless come up with rather different findings, or ways of looking at the same phenomenon. A grassroots perspective, if you like, might yield quite different, perhaps even opposing positions to those offered by non-ethnographic studies. The need to use a variety of methodologies to empirically question or qualify dominant theories in the sociology of religion (theories of secularization or rational choice theory for instance) is what Davie (2007) has recently called for as a way of gaining a better understanding of the role of religion in the modern or postmodern world.

I would like to quote a couple of young Soka Gakkai members who were supporting Komeito. Maguro, a second year philosophy student, saw the religious philosophy and various activities of Soka Gakkai as a way for him to develop his sense of humanity (*ningensei*) and a deeper sense of compassion (*jishi*) especially for weaker members of society, and then developing the courage to stand up for such beliefs. This process of what he termed 'human revolution', in which he challenged himself to live up to such beliefs, was for him the most important process to engage

with as a human being. He felt the need for people to develop a commitment to 'humanity' (the common good and exemplary human behaviour) and a commitment to manifest such 'humanity' in one's own social interactions. This included developing one's own area of expertise in a particular field, but with the focus on improving the social world and the human relationships in which one found oneself in the process. This was a way to develop the ability (*ningenryoku*) to help people who may be suffering in some way. He says,

The first step is to develop such a way of thinking, and then to see where each person in their individual circumstances can help. Perhaps it is in the future, perhaps it is now – that varies according to each person . . . the most important thing is that people address those around them who are suffering. (Maguro 31/5/04)

Another young man agrees, "I think one's behaviour as a human being is very important", before going on to explain why he supports the political party Komeito.

Komeito represents my own beliefs and my own desires [in the political realm]. That is, I want to contribute to world peace, improve society to help weaker members of society – you have to enter the political world to try to do that. I want society to help those in need, use public money more carefully. (Yuki 21/704)

The kind of society that these young men wanted to see echoes what many young Soka Gakkai members were telling me. They wanted to help create a society with

No discrimination, and where each person can fulfil their dreams. Like Komeito is focusing on welfare. I want to be able to help people who are financially worst off in society, to make the government allocate money appropriately to help people. (ibid.)

While the space given here won't allow me to use quotes from the more than hundred young people I spoke and associated with, interviewed, and observed during my year in Japan, their understanding of the common good was putting priority on creating a society that ensured equality through proper welfare and education for all citizens; creating a society that helped people in need including the elderly (maybe an unusual concern for young people in their early twenties). They also fully supported universal scholarship provision for young people who wanted to go to university, one of Komeito's proposals; and there was a rising concern with environmental protection as part of the structural processes needed to establish a more humane and peace-oriented society. Therefore, the typical political concerns were with welfare, social justice, and peace, which rang through the type of jobs they often envisioned for themselves. While such political issues seem modern universal

concerns based on a moral framework of equality and social justice, I found myself asking how this compared to the foot-soldier image of Soka Gakkai members as a political force to be feared.

On the other hand, as already mentioned, we might at least partially agree with the kind of structural analysis that seemed to underlie Toshikawa's portrayal of a huge political force in Japanese society driven by religious ideals. Yet, when I looked at the politics being advocated by these young Soka Gakkai members and Komeito supporters, they not only seemed modern and 'social democratic', they also lacked any religious rhetoric.

During my field work, I therefore found myself faced with a tension between a sociological perspective that represented a religious group as a structural form of danger, which may not always seem very democratic or egalitarian, and a grassroots practice and political engagement that seemed to be undertaken by morally concerned groups of young people who wanted societal values to be based on universal respect for the equality and dignity of human life. While their moral concerns clearly stem from their religious philosophy, that is, from Soka Gakkai's and more specifically Ikeda's interpretation of Nichiren Buddhism, in their public sphere of canvassing for Komeito, the ethics they were promoting were surprisingly not being represented as the prerogative of one religious denomination, but as a universal ethics they were hoping would play a bigger part in politics. In fact, their political concerns were not only completely secular in this sense, but because of their strong ethical or moral voice, there was also no sense of interest-based politics, which otherwise is seen as so typical in Japan.

While these socially concerned and active citizens are clearly socialised in this manner through their participation in Soka Gakkai activities, the most influential impact on their thinking is the long-term spiritual leader Daisaku Ikeda. One can certainly empathise with the fear critics have concerning the power Ikeda enjoys in Soka Gakkai; the organisation is often seen as representing a semi-totalitarian system, or as epitomising the 'Japanese' group structures that keep typical hierarchies in place. Nakane's portrayal of new religions as mirroring "Japan's former military system" in which their "astonishing success . . . seems to be attributable mainly to their system of vertical organisation" ([1970] 1998:61) still lingers, and from a structural perspective, one could argue justifiably so. The picture of a seemingly undemocratic, hierarchical organisation that it represents to some outsiders is perpetuated by the sense of reverence, respect and admiration with which Ikeda is treated. His 'charismatic' leadership is represented through his many achievements, his books and his speeches, and the image of an international statesman. Yet, his power lies more than anywhere else in how he interprets

Nichiren Buddhism and how he is seen to embody that interpretation. Whichever way you want to construe his role, the practical effect of his interpretation of Nichiren Buddhism as a humane philosophy that promotes equality, respect and belief in the human potential to create social good is the socialization of engaged, broadly educated, independent – in the sense of feeling self-empowered and personally responsible for their individual and social circumstances - and highly positive young people.

Contrary to many recent studies about youth in Japan, these young people feel empowered enough to want to take responsibility for their own social and political world. As some of the social concerns briefly outlined earlier indicate, these do not appear to be reactionary, right-wing collaborators, or narrow-minded religious bigots, as one might have presumed from listening to Toshikawa's statement to the press about them. In fact, I think we are left with something approaching an ideal notion of the democratically-minded citizen who works for the common social good with little, if any, interest-based politics coming into play for these people. How should we look at a structural "form" that is often dismissed as politically illegitimate and a "content" (at least concerning the young supporters) of groups of active citizens?

In conclusion, I therefore argue that we will gain academically from reconsidering our terminology and conceptualisation about this group in particular (for how long do we call it a new religion, is one question that may arise), and potentially about other so-called new religious groups as well. I also argue that religion, in some instances, could give rise to one of the most valued objectives of modernity – objectivity. I use 'objectivity' here to mean the ability to debate issues about a shared public and social life without implicating religious doctrines or other interest-based ideologies. In this sense, these young people's political objectives are non-partisan or 'objective', if you like, as they share a commitment to politics that focuses on encompassing issues of wider common concerns such as equality, welfare, and environmental protection (we may of course question how far Komeito can live up to these ideals). My findings tell me that religion can be a potential ethical force in politics without necessarily being a religious one, or even without necessarily being a partisan one.

I would like to end this article by posing a question about how to reconcile this epistemological dilemma between a structural analysis of a big powerful religious group and what takes place at the grassroots level of political participation. My current research interests are therefore with these Simmelian dialectical distinctions between form and content, as well as with the relationship between ethics and politics, and the impact of religious leadership on social behaviour.

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